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# Ambiguity in an Alaskan History Theme Park: Presenting “History as Commodity” and “History as Heritage”

TITY DE VRIES

**Abstract:** America's most northern history theme park has been located in Fairbanks, Alaska since 1967. This article focuses on the evolution of the Alaskaland/Pioneer Park: from a tourist attraction where Alaskan traditions of progress and boosterism ruled into a community park with a sincere concern for preserving the local past. Due to its origins, and in spite of decades of controversies, the park became an excellent example of “partnership” between public and private sectors which determine the park's profile and destination. The result is a popularized presentation of Fairbanks' early twentieth-century pioneer experience where historic authenticity and commercial activities co-exist harmoniously.

**Key words:** History theme park, Fairbanks Alaska, history as commodity, Alaskaland/Pioneer Park, Alaska's Purchase Centennial

“Here on the banks of the Chena grew the only city, the only truly permanent, growing, expanding, bona fide city of the stampede. Among all the gold en-

campments, Dawson, Nome, Valdez, Iditarod, Ruby, this one, Fairbanks, alone, became the metropolis the pioneers envisioned.”<sup>1</sup>

SINCE 1967 AMERICA’S NORTHERNMOST HISTORY THEME PARK has been located in Fairbanks, Alaska on the banks of the Chena River. Pioneer Park (before 2002 named Alaskaland) fits into the category of ‘artificial’ history parks: its location is not historically authentic and most of its buildings and attractions were relocated from elsewhere in the Fairbanks district to the park site.<sup>2</sup> Buildings, exhibits, and attractions are partly historic, partly reconstructed, and newly built. Visitors can learn something about Fairbanks’ 1903 gold rush history, life on the Last Frontier, and Alaska’s native culture, and they have ample opportunity to buy souvenirs, play mini-golf or ride the antique carousel, or enjoy food and drink in an original log cabin.

Alaskaland/Pioneer Park has always been a public park. It started out as the central exhibition site of Alaska’s Centennial Celebration in 1967, was operated for decades by the City of Fairbanks, and became the responsibility of the Fairbanks North Star Borough in 1987. Being a *public* history theme park makes Alaskaland unusual: most history theme parks are private enterprises (for example Knott’s Berry Farm in Southern California) or operated by a nonprofit organization like the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. Public historic parks are usually the responsibility of the National Park Service (like Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia) or a state agency: Big Delta State Historic Park, for example, is owned by the State of Alaska and managed by the Alaska Department of Natural Resources.

Established in 1967 as the exhibition site of the Alaska Purchase Centennial Celebration, Alaskaland became a permanent attraction of Fairbanks where locals as well as tourists can “relive the past and explore the treasures of the Golden Heart.”<sup>3</sup> During its forty years of existence, the ratio between the “amusement” character of the park and its “history” identity underwent a change. For decades, making money from the park was considered more important than preserving Fairbanks’ heritage, and not until the turn of the century was it decided that the park’s main orientation in the future would be to preserve and exhibit Fairbanks’ heritage.

The process of this shift in opinion offers an excellent opportunity to study the impact of changing perceptions on heritage and historic preservation at

1. “The Big Stampede,” print of the narration text with the diorama, 1967, Pioneer Museum, Fairbanks, p. 11.

2. Colin Sorensen, “Theme Parks and Time Machines,” in *The New Museology*, ed. Peter Vergo (London: Reaktion Books, 1989), 60–73, 64. Applying a broad definition of “outdoor museum,” one might consider Alaskaland/Pioneer Park as such, although the presence of recreational attractions makes Alaskaland/Pioneer Park less an educational facility than Colonial Williamsburg. For definitions of outdoor museums see William J. Murtagh, *Keeping Time: the History and Theory of Preservation in America* (Pittstown: The Main Street Press, 1988) 90–91, 94.

3. Fairbanks North Star Borough, *Pioneer Park*: <<http://www.co.fairbanks.ak.us/Parks&Rec/PioneerPark/default.htm>> (accessed January 15, 2007).

a local level in a peripheral region of America. In this article I will argue that the choice for a heritage approach coincided with a more realistic perception of Fairbanks' position in Alaska's tourist industry, resulting in a new policy which combines an increased public interest in the local past with the need for a profitable operation. The decades-long discourse on the destination of the park reflects how the diverse and often conflicting interests of involved individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions affected this transformation process, and shows in particular the growing community consciousness of Fairbanks citizens.

### *Celebrations of Progress*

First we will take a short tour of the park to get an impression of the way Alaska's and Fairbanks' pioneer history is currently represented. Upon entering the park, visitors can make a choice between several sections and attractions which show different aspects of Alaskan life and its past.<sup>4</sup> A train ride with the elevated Crooked Creek Whiskey Island Railroad circling the park offers an overall view of the park. The engine is a replica of the narrow gauge trains that were used for transportation between the gold mines and Fairbanks in the early twentieth century.

Close to the entrance is situated the large, circular building of the Alaska Centennial Center for the Arts (formerly the Civic Center), which is decorated on the outside with native masks and signs, referring to the indigenous people who inhabited Alaska long before the arrival of whites. To the left, passing the Square Dance Hall, visitors walk into the Mining Valley, a rather large area with scattered old and new log cabins and historic mining machinery and artifacts. A reconstruction of a placer mining operation with a sluice box and water cannon is the most prominent historic attraction. The open-air restaurant Alaska Salmon Bake dominates the area. Signs and plaques explain the history of gold mining in the Fairbanks district. More Fairbanks and mining history is exhibited in the Hard Rock Mine Tunnel surrounding the Mining Valley.

Returning to the central plaza, visitors pass the Gold Dome, an example of igloo-like geodesic dome architecture, where they can get an impression of Alaska's rich and fascinating aviation history in the Pioneer Air Museum. The central plaza itself offers an antique carousel, food stands, the Last Frontier mini-golf, and a play area. Picnic facilities and nature trails can be found in the Wilderness area. Close to the Chena River is the Native Village, with its sod dwellings and a Native Museum with art and artifacts of Native groups of Alaska. In the early years of the park, demonstrations of totem carving, Native dancing, and blanket tossing took place here.

4. Being a public park, the general admission is free. Most individual attractions ask a small fee. The summer season in Fairbanks is short—the park's attractions open late May and close late August or early September.



Wooden plaque with logo of the Alaska Purchase Centennial Celebration 1967, exhibited in the Alaska Centennial Center for the Arts, Pioneer Park, Fairbanks, Alaska, Summer 2003. (Photograph by Henk Binnendijk)

The historic heart of the park is Gold Rush Town, located in the southeastern section and surrounded by the 1923 Harding Railroad car (in which President Harding traveled to the town of Nenana, midway Anchorage and Fairbanks, for the festive completion of the railroad between the two cities), the historic sternwheeler S.S. *Nenana*, and the Railroad Depot. A couple of unpaved streets lined with some thirty original log cabins, frame houses, a small wooden church, and some “old looking” new buildings housing the Pioneer Hall and Museum and the Palace Theatre & Saloon, offer a romanticized and nostalgic representation of life in gold-rush Fairbanks during the lusty, brawling Alaskan boom town days at the beginning of the twentieth century. Most log cabins house shops or food stands and carry nostalgic names like Shivering Sourdoughs, Skagway Jim’s, and Dineega Trading Company. Plaques next to the front doors tell the cabins’ colorful histories, referring to the times these cabins were proof that their owners knew how to survive in the harsh Alaskan conditions.





Historic mining equipment in the Mining Valley, Pioneer Park, Fairbanks, Alaska, Summer 2003. (Photograph by Henk Binnendijk)



Historic shack and log cabin, in use as food stand in Gold Rush Town, Pioneer Park, Fairbanks, Alaska, Summer 2003. (Photograph by Henk Binnendijk)

In the replica Palace Theatre and Saloon visitors can enjoy The Golden Heart Revue at night. The show consists of songs and acts, mostly relating Fairbanks' history as an exciting success story, except for some serious undertones about the harshness of life in Interior Alaska. Another and very different presentation of the early pioneer story, the Big Stampede Show, can be seen in the Pioneer Hall and Museum. This show focuses on the heroic gold seekers of the Klondike (1898) and Fairbanks (1903) gold rushes. The audience is seated on chairs on a turntable, and turning slowly, listening to the voice of the narrator, they view fifteen mural-sized paintings of Rusty Heurlin, an artist of considerable local renown. None of these theatrical productions pays attention to the negative consequences of these gold rushes: in conquering the wilderness, those pioneers started the drive for economic progress and boosterism without considering the effects for the natural environment or the Alaska Natives.

### *Traditions of Progress and Boosterism*

The main historic attractions of Alaskaland/Pioneer Park fit into Michael Kammen's concept of a "tradition of progress" which is so characteristic for hundreds of local histories in America.<sup>5</sup> New modes of transportation like trains, sternwheelers, and airplanes, as well as the discovery and mining of gold, meant progress to Fairbanks and Interior Alaska, the park conveys. The exhibition of the Harding Railroad car and the sternwheeler S.S. *Nenana*, the narrow gauge railway encircling the park, the Pioneer Air Museum, the Mining Valley, and Gold Rush Town are all celebrations of progress, emphasizing how Fairbanks and Interior Alaska became part of "civilized and modern" America, while the drawbacks of progress are left out. The pioneers, the white founding fathers of Fairbanks, with their log cabins and mining machinery, are presented as the heroes of this process of civilization.

Another very noticeable characteristic of the park is the influence of the profit and nonprofit sectors in this public facility. Alaskaland/Pioneer Park is maintained and operated by the public servants of the Fairbanks North Star Borough, but most historic attractions are operated by private nonprofit groups with a wide range of competences. The Pioneer Museum and historic structures—the sternwheeler *Nenana* (a National Historic Landmark), the Harding Railroad Car (listed on the National Register of Historic Places), and the house museums Judge Wickersham House (also listed on the National Register of Historic Places) and Kitty Hensley House are maintained and operated by historic societies,<sup>6</sup> whose policies are not restricted by formal regula-

5. Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 14.

6. Fairbanks Historical Preservation Foundation and Tanana Valley Historic Society. The Interior and Arctic Alaska Aeronautical Foundation, the Pioneers of Alaska, and the Friends of



tions concerning preservation or restoration. Private businesses—souvenir shops and food stands in log cabins, an open-air restaurant, rides, mini-golf, shows—are scattered throughout the park, and often dominate the historic parts. Even though Alaskaland/Pioneer Park is a public park, its presentation (and its history, as we shall see) seems to indicate that the private sector rather than the public sector is the primary custodian of tradition in Fairbanks.<sup>7</sup>

### *Pioneer Origins of the Park*

In his impressive study on the evolution of America's traditions, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, Michael Kammen cited "heritage" as one of the key words in American culture since the mid-1950s.<sup>8</sup> For Kammen, heritage was sometimes a code word associated with the preservation of old structures; at other times it signified the struggles for survival of various groups and subcultures. For politicians and entrepreneurs, heritage often offered an ideologically useful or meaningful label for their own goals. Although the word "heritage" was hardly used in Alaska until the 1970s, Kammen's definitions of it are relevant to the origins, establishment, and early operation of Alaskaland. The idea of establishing a history park in Fairbanks originated from the members of Igloo 4 of the Pioneers of Alaska during the late 1950s.<sup>9</sup> They can be considered the first actors in the history of the park. In the perception of the Fairbanks Pioneers, this future Pioneer Park should "change some of the misconceptions of Alaska and the life here in the far north, where it is so infernally cold. . . . The pioneers, the original pioneers, are the source of the true information and the facts that are necessary to create this museum and park and historical project for the benefit of all times and for everyone."<sup>10</sup> By establishing the park, the Pioneers of Alaska hoped to prevent the spiritual and material culture of the first generations of white American settlers in early twentieth-century Fairbanks from disappearing into oblivion.

By that time, celebrating the "pioneer life of yesterday" and the accomplishments of early settlers had become a regular focus in the public commemoration of America's past, in particular in the Midwest, as John Bodnar convincingly argues in *Remaking America*.<sup>11</sup> While in the late nineteenth cen-

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the Tanana Valley Railroad operate the Pioneer Air Museum, the Pioneer Museum and Big Stampede Show, and the narrow gauge railroad.

7. Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 13.

8. *Ibid.*, 621.

9. The organization of Pioneers of Alaska was established in Nome, in February 1907. The term "Igloo" was chosen as the name for the local chapters of male members. Women's chapters were named "Auxiliary." Members are admitted only after thirty years of residency in the state.

10. Adolf Stock, "Introduction," typescript, n.d., pp. 2–3, Alaskaland Scrapbook, no.1, 1962 (Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks).

11. John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992) in particular 113–66.

ture the ruling white middle class considered pioneers “as progenitors who laid the foundation for the prosperity that they now enjoyed,” in the twentieth century pioneers became one of the dominant symbols of public memory: they became “nation builders, conservators of tradition, and models of survival during difficult times.”<sup>12</sup> So the Fairbanks Pioneer initiative was not unique. Much earlier similar groups and organizations had started to preserve remnants of pioneer life for the future. Colonial Williamsburg and Greenfield Village launched two early and influential examples between the World Wars. The Sons and Daughters of Idaho Pioneers did the same on a smaller, local scale in 1933, acquiring two 1863 log cabins and relocating them to Julia Davis Park, where Pioneer Village was established. Something similar happened in Sturbridge, Massachusetts, where in 1946 New England’s first living farm and village museum was opened as Old Sturbridge Village, composed of old buildings and structures which had been moved from other places. It was also no coincidence that the first ideas and plans for an Alaska history park developed in the late 1950s. All over America in the 1950s public interest in the national, regional, or local past increased. The immediate popularity of history parks like Colonial Williamsburg and Greenfield Village served as a source of inspiration for similar postwar initiatives.<sup>13</sup>

Alaska had been pushed firmly into the twentieth century during World War II. The building of military bases and the construction of the famous 1,520-mile-long Alaska Highway initiated a rapid modernization process. After the war, Fairbanks continued to be the center of America’s most northern defensive system, and military activities dominated the local economy. Some even say that military spending rescued Fairbanks as a town that was struggling to survive and transformed it into a modern urban center.<sup>14</sup> Statehood in 1959 contributed to a rising Alaskan self-consciousness. Maybe even more than elsewhere in the United States, the pace and extent of change in Alaska involved a sense of loss of the traditional ways of life and perhaps even a sense of radical discontinuity with the world as it had hitherto been known. In downtown Fairbanks, due to urban renewal projects, early twentieth century log cabins and other structures were replaced by modern buildings, and more and more the pioneer life style retreated to remote mountain and river communities. At that time the Fairbanks Pioneers of Alaska never objected to this process of urban modernization, which symbolized Fairbanks’ prosperity and affluence. However, very soon they must have realized that together with the disappearance of the log cabins (the icons of the Alaskan experience), their own contribution to the city’s origins and development was to disappear with them. In preserving the remaining log cabins by moving them to a fu-

12. Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 135–36.

13. Kammen, *Mystic Chords*, 554–56.

14. Claus-M. Naske and L. J. Rowinski, *Fairbanks a Pictorial History* (Norfolk, VA: The Donning Company Publishers, 1981), 114–16.

ture Pioneer Park, the Fairbanks Pioneers not only wanted to educate younger generations, but also aimed to safeguard their role in Fairbanks' history.

For the park's location the Pioneers had in mind seventy-two acres on the south bank of the Chena River. From the early 1960s on they started to lobby for acquisition of this state land with the result that finally, in September 1962, the State Division of Lands transferred forty-four acres of this lot to the University of Alaska, which acted as an inter-agency between the state and the Pioneers until June 1965.<sup>15</sup> Immediately, the university entered into a management contract with Pioneer Memorial Park, Inc., which was to develop the land as "a Pioneer Park and Museum for the preservation, conservation and display of items of an historical nature for the benefit of tourists, students and all Alaskan residents."<sup>16</sup> The board of Pioneer Memorial Park, Inc., consisting of representatives of the University, Igloo 4 of the Pioneers of Alaska and the Tanana-Yukon Historical Society, would supervise the project. In making tourists the first target group, the Pioneers anticipated the participation of entrepreneurs and businessmen in this project. The profit motive was present from the very first moment that the plans of the Pioneers were to realize. On March 24, 1963, volunteers cut the first sod and started to clear the site of trees, shrubs, and weeds in preparation for building the park.

### *Collecting the Past*

In the meantime, the Pioneers had also started to collect historic buildings and artifacts to be exhibited in the future park. Citizens of Fairbanks donated their downtown log cabins when those were replaced by modern structures. Already in May 1961 Alaska Railroad had granted the Harding railroad car, together with the historic steam engine no. 1 of the former Tanana Valley Railroad between Fairbanks and the town of Chena.

A couple of years earlier, in 1957, another group of citizens, members of the Fairbanks Chamber of Commerce, had purchased the sternwheeler *Nenana*, the famous riverboat which had served as the lifeline for thousands of white and native settlers along the Tanana and Yukon rivers during the early decades of the twentieth century: "She was the Queen of the Yukon—she meant everything to the old sourdoughs."<sup>17</sup> The *Nenana* was and still is a highlight of American ship design, a blending of steam, wood, and paddlewheel technology. With her 1.120 tons, 237-foot length, fifty-two passenger capacity, and three hun-

15. The acquisition of the lot created a confrontation with the City of Fairbanks, which thought the site should be used for housing and offered the Pioneers the former city dump location as an alternative. Finally, forty-four acres were destined for the future park, and the rest of the lot was reserved for a future Pioneer Home for elderly people.

16. "History—Alaskaland," typescript, Nov. 1967, p. 2, Folder 7, Box 8, Alaskaland Commission Papers (Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks).

17. *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner Visitors Guide to A67*, May 24, 1967, p. 5.

dred tons of cargo capacity, she is the second largest of all wooden hull stern-wheelers in existence.<sup>18</sup> It's a landmark of Alaska's past, although the stern-wheeler never anchored in Fairbanks, nor sailed the Chena River during her working years. After World War II, trains, airplanes, and the Alaskan Highway had taken over the commercial transportation, and in 1955 the S.S. *Nenana* was disposed of. Eventually, after years of neglect and maltreatment, the ship was to become the centerpiece of the park. In the fall of 1965, the proud *Nenana*, with her battered hull and interior, traveled the Chena River several miles, negotiating sand bars and dike channels to a new resting place.

### *Celebrating the Centennial*

State and local authorities became actively involved in the development of the park in 1964 when Fairbanks succeeded in becoming the central exhibition site for the upcoming celebration of Alaska's Purchase Centennial in 1967. Organizing the Centennial activities was the responsibility of the Alaska State Centennial Commission, under chairmanship of Bob Arnold. He emphasized that the centennial was not just another way to lure tourists to Alaska in 1967; its objectives included helping to unite Alaskans and linking them to the state's past and present; to publicize Alaska's unique past, its aboriginal culture, and its unmatched recreation resources; to promote the real Alaska—modern cities, culture, and wilderness; and to do those things “everyone had been too busy to do before”—placing historical markers and historical plaques, establishing museums, reconstructing historic buildings, and developing other attractions for Alaskans and tourists alike.<sup>19</sup> In fact, the centennial celebration was also meant to be a new orientation for the young state, creating a more mature and civilized image of Alaska by focusing on its past, present, and future. And the future Pioneer Park of Fairbanks was to be the central exhibition site of this new orientation.

The magic theme of the centennial celebration was “North to the Future”; a motto submitted by Richard Peter, a radio-television man from Juneau, who won the motto contest in December 1963. “North to the Future” referred to the famous words of Horace Greeley, “Go West, Young Man”: “‘North to the Future’ is a reminder that beyond the horizon of urban clutter there is a Great Land beneath our flag that can provide a new tomorrow for this century’s ‘huddled masses yearning to be free,’ explained Peter.”<sup>20</sup> The exhibit of Alaska’s

18. Marilyn Jesmain, “Heritage Interpretation on the SS *Nenana*, The Last of the Great Riverboats in Alaska” (M.A. Thesis, University of Alaska Fairbanks, 1994), 32.

19. Bob Arnold to Alaska Centennial Commission: Advisory Memo 32, May 7, 1964, Folder I -A: Advisory Memos 1–56, Box 3, Alaska Purchase Centennial Collection (Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks).

20. “Explanation North to the Future,” clipping *Centennial Press*, 2, no. 9, Sept. 1964, Folder II-C, Box 1, Alaska Purchase Centennial Collection (Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks). Peter won \$300, donated by Igloo 4 of the Pioneers.

past, its hundred years of accomplishments, would serve mainly as an attractive backdrop to the state's immense future possibilities.

The Pioneer Park lot on the Chena River was subleased for \$40 a year to the A67 (short for Alaska '67) nonprofit organization, which was allowed to use the site until December 31, 1967. The rent was low, but the A67 organization was required to make permanent improvements to the site, including a building suitable for use as a permanent exhibit hall.<sup>21</sup> This contribution made the A67 organization another major actor in the development of the park.

In fact, the Centennial Celebration with Fairbanks as exhibition site accelerated the process which had been started by the Pioneers a couple of years earlier. Due to the discovery and subsequent exploitation of oil resources, the Alaskan economy was booming from the early 1960s on, and the small-town character of Anchorage and Fairbanks was changing rapidly with the construction of office buildings and hotels of steel and concrete. Modernization became the motor for saving the remnants of the past, and subsequently for inventing a tradition of Alaskan life in that past. Due to the Centennial Celebration's aim to attract more businesses as well as tourists to the state, Alaska's past became a marketing instrument. By focusing on progress as a core element of past and present (North to the Future), and emphasizing the role of transportation in the exploration and operation of Alaska's resources, the adventure and heroism of several gold rushes, and the harsh life of early pioneers in the arctic wilderness, an attractive tradition was developed.

### *Years of Hope, Despair, and Controversy*

On May 28, 1967 twelve thousand persons visited the opening of the exhibition. The next day, another 7,500 visitors walked through the gates, which made the first weekend a success by some standards, although not financially. Financial problems increased during the summer, when the daily operating costs of the park turned out to be much higher than its revenues, causing a daily deficit of \$2000.<sup>22</sup> The situation worsened after August 14. The Chena River flooded the grounds and the park had to be closed down for the rest of the season. Debt-ridden and damaged by silt, it became apparent that the park required the intervention of the authorities in order to remain in trust for the public. On December 19, 1967, with a voting margin of 2 to 1, the City Council consented in the takeover of the park and its operation from the A67 organization. The takeover was financed by a \$1.5 million loan of the state, which made Alaskaland (as the site had been renamed in August 1967) free of debts

21. "History—Alaskaland," typescript, Nov. 1967, p. 3, Folder 7, Box 8, Alaskaland Commission Papers (Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks).

22. Unidentified newspaper clipping, June 24, 1967, Alaskaland Scrapbook no. 1 (Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks).

and with all creditors paid.<sup>23</sup> This operation allowed the park to continue to exist, with the State of Alaska and the City of Fairbanks as major actors in its development.

As had been expected after the delay caused by the takeover and the repair of the flood damage, there was too little time left to prepare for a successful 1968 season. During the next years the management, supported by the city and the local Chamber of Commerce, tried to make the park self-sufficient by attracting activities ranging from Fairbanks Golden Days festivities (the annual celebration of the Fairbanks' 1903 Gold Rush with parades and fireworks), to industrial exhibits and shows, amusement and art exhibitions, a "Light Show Happening" from San Francisco, and in November 1969, the Governors Ball. As a result, the park evolved primarily into a convenient and attractive venue for all sorts of events, instead of becoming a place to experience Fairbanks' history and to learn about its past. With the consent of the city, the original goals of the Pioneers of Alaska took second place to a profitable operation of Alaskaland. Local business had emerged as a major force in the development of the park.

In spite of this new emphasis, the park was still losing money, which is why the city proposed to increase its budget by \$50,000, to \$330,000, in December 1969. This proposal was opposed by a group of Fairbanks citizens, who had organized themselves in the Real Property Taxpayer's Association, and who considered the park a waste of taxpayer's money. They demanded a referendum on the issue. Their proposal was to return Alaskaland to the state, which would be responsible for its operation. For more than six months, the future of Alaskaland was discussed publicly in a debate that reflected Alaskaland's position in the Fairbanks community. For the first but not the last time, the citizens of Fairbanks would play a decisive role in determining the future of the park. The *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* made this clear: Alaskaland was "threatened by those who would see our city retrogress instead of progress," and "Alaskaland is our pride. It represents a community effort of which we can be proud."<sup>24</sup> The Taxpayer's Association's argument was that the city owed the state \$1.5 million, and if the city gave Alaskaland back to the state, it would be rid of the loan.

The referendum was set for July 15, 1970, and in the preceding week several ads on the issue appeared in the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*. "Do you want the City of Fairbanks to run an amusement park?" asked the Real Property Tax Payers Association. Those in favor of keeping Alaskaland focused on the recreational value of the park and its value for families and visitors.<sup>25</sup> This debate shows how involved in the park Fairbanks residents were. In the end,

23. Alaskaland Commission, *Alaskaland Development Plan: Goals and Strategies for Course of Action for Alaskaland Park*, Fairbanks, Alaskaland, May, 1979, no pages, chapter "Alaskaland Park History," Folder Development Plan 3rd Draft, Box 1, Alaskaland Commission Papers (Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks).

24. *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, April 6, 1970.

25. *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, July 10, July 11, July 13, 1970.



with 1,630 to 408 votes, they said *no* to returning Alaskaland to the state, and with this endorsement the municipal operation of the park continued.

A couple of months later, on November 13, 1970, the city installed the Alaskaland Commission. One of its assignments was to study the future of the park and to explore business plans with more potential for success. Although it would take this commission almost nine years to produce a detailed plan for the future, the Alaskaland Commission evolved into an important but not very successful voice for change in the park's development by emphasizing the need for restoring and preserving the historic structures. However, the powers of the commission were limited, and its objections to expansion of commercial activities in the park were not very successful, partly due to the weak financial situation of the city. In November 1971, the 1972 budget for the park was slashed in half to \$100,000. Seven temporary workers had to be laid off and activities had to be restricted. Lack of money and personnel caused increasing vandalism in the park and lack of maintenance was showing.

Eventually 1972 turned out to be a good year for Alaskaland. In April of that year, the state forgave the city its \$1.5 million debt: "The monkey is off the city's back. There is now much less room for excuses. It is time to put Alaskaland at the top of the list of city attractions, making it a showplace for civic pride."<sup>26</sup> In 1972, 75,000 more people visited the park than in 1971, a new camper park was constructed, and the animal population of the Wildlife Park was increased with a bear, two moose, two reindeer, and a baby reindeer. However, to be successful, the park required a 25% increase of its budget, according to the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*.<sup>27</sup>

After a couple of unproductive years, a new controversy on the future of Alaskaland arose in 1975. Tour operators had dropped the park from their Alaska programs because of its shabbiness, and pointing to the deterioration of the park and its failure as community center, the editors of the *News-Miner* commented: "Our city fathers have never had the desire to make Alaskaland amount to anything. . . . There is not enough money to do anything properly, and no one has ever defined exactly what is expected of the park."<sup>28</sup> Although the City Council approved an extra budget of \$261,000 for improvements and repairs in late March 1976, Council members remained divided on the purpose of the park: should it be mainly a tourist attraction, a community park, or both?

The renovation was a success: "Alaskaland: Drastic facelift turning 'City Dump' into showcase," announced the *News-Miner* on July 4, 1976. And a month later, the newspaper editors concluded that the money had been well spent and that the new paint and repairs had resulted in more visitors than ever.<sup>29</sup>

26. Unidentified news clipping, May 17, 1972, Alaskaland Scrapbook, no. 3, January 1971–March 1973 (Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks).

27. *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, Oct. 13, 1972.

28. *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, June 30, 1975.

29. *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, August 9, 1976.

This increased number of visitors was not surprising: in those years Fairbanks was booming from the construction of the 798-mile-long Trans Alaska Pipe Line, which was to connect the oil fields of Prudhoe Bay in the North with the tidewater at Valdez. From 1974 until 1977 Fairbanks was not only the management, transportation, and supply center for the pipeline project, but also the hiring and job termination center, and the city was flooded with people looking for jobs and those who were returning from work with big paychecks.<sup>30</sup> In the summer months Alaskaland was the main open-air recreation site in the city, and many oil and construction workers spent time there: relaxing or enjoying the park before traveling to work in the north or to their homes in the south. The pipeline boom also created extra budget for the city, and for a while Alaskaland's future should have looked less problematic.

The renovation had not changed the character of the park, though. Very soon complaints about the quality of Alaskaland offerings recurred, and again tour operators discouraged their clients from going there. In particular, conditions in the zoo or Wildlife Park were severely criticized. The Alaskaland Commission suggested improvements to the zoo, which would cost \$500,000. The City Council considered this too expensive and voted against it.<sup>31</sup>

The zoo issue reopened the debate on the future of Alaskaland, resulting in a consensus that if Fairbanks wanted to keep the park, it had to be completely renovated. The Alaskaland Commission took the initiative in May 1979 by presenting its *Alaskaland Development Plan: Goals and Strategies for Course of Action for Alaskaland Park, Fairbanks, Alaska. 1980's—Decade of Alaskaland*. The Commission described the main objective of the future park as "reflecting pride in community, our roots and heritage, and that this be presented to the visitor of the park" and she recommended hiring a professional consultant to draw a master plan for the future.<sup>32</sup> The city agreed, and in the early fall, Jack Pentec of Pentec Design in Charlotte, North Carolina was hired for \$35,000 to draft a *Masterplan Alaskaland* with the condition (obtained by the Commission) that Alaskaland would not be turned into a Disneyland type of park. For the first time in its twelve years of existence, the planning and development of Alaskaland were in professional hands.

### *A Master Plan for Alaskaland*

Pentec was harsh in his evaluation of the condition of the park:

The conditions observed by this Consultant on his first trip to Alaskaland in the summer of 1979 and reported to the City Council at that time, cited instances

30. Naske and Rowinski, *Fairbanks*, 164.

31. Unidentified news clipping, n.d., Alaskaland Scrapbook no. 6, 1978 (Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks).

32. *Alaskaland Development Plan*, First Draft, 1979, Folder Development Plan 2nd Draft, Box 1, Alaskaland Commission Papers (Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks).

of neglect bordering on criminal negligence abounding in the park. . . . The Zoo was a shock. The Mining Valley Section was inoperable. The Great Stampede did not operate. The Native Village had obviously been allowed to deteriorate for a number of years. The Museum was closed. Concessionaires opened late and erratically. The Train did not run. The Gold Dome was abandoned. Only the Civic Center seemed to function.

Pentes blamed the city in particular for the deterioration of the park: "If Alaskaland were the water department, Fairbanks would be without water 75% of the time."<sup>33</sup>

After two site visits, Pentes concluded that Alaskaland would never have the attraction of a Disneyland or Colonial Williamsburg—at best it was a "themed public park, offering experiences based on the history of the state, its people and its legacies. . . . A themed public park is rare, but in the case of Alaskaland, fully acceptable. . . . Hardly any other spot on earth can match the sense of place and strength of feeling experienced in the vastness and beauty of this great state." In Pentes' opinion, Alaskaland should be appealing to both the tourist and the resident alike, and therefore he recommended installing more sensational attractions in combination with a profitable exploitation of the historic parts, a more professional management team, and improvement of the infrastructure and maintenance.<sup>34</sup> Obviously, Pentes had no objections to a more commercialized approach in order to attract more visitors: "In the theme park business, numbers are everything."<sup>35</sup> One of his ideas was to construct a "Big Sluice" water-slide in the Mining Valley area, inspired by the gold wash sluices. The design of the Big Sluice was impressive—the blue fiber water attraction would rise above the Mining Valley and dominate the other attractions. However, Pentes hadn't realized that installing an open-air *water* attraction wasn't appropriate given the Alaskan climate, where the summer season is so short and cool. The Big Sluice plan was never carried out.

Another ambitious proposal was the conversion of the geodesic Gold Dome into an Exploratorium with a multipurpose planetarium theatre or "Aurorium" where visitors could watch the northern lights and visit a "hands-on museum" and a Great Pipe Line Show. Although this plan was applauded more widely, it too was never realized.

Due to lack of support and money (and no doubt his rather patronizing attitude), in the end just a few of Pentes' recommendations were acted upon. The infrastructure of the park was improved and in 1980, after the death of the park's mascot Ed the Moose, the zoo closed, which ended the public's complaints about the animals' disgraceful living conditions. The consultant's

33. "Summary of Conclusions," no pages, Jack Pentes/Pentes Design, *Alaskaland Masterplan*, 1979, Folder Masterplan, Box 1, Alaskaland Commission Papers (Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks).

34. *Alaskaland Masterplan*, 10–11.

35. *Alaskaland Masterplan*, 8.

proposals for an Air/Transport Museum and Square Dance Hall were executed later in the 1980s: in 1984 the Alaskaland Pioneer Air Museum was installed in the Gold Dome and a Square Dance Hall was built near the entrance of Mining Valley. However, the Alaskaland Commission's 1980 initiative to apply for historic district status for Gold Rush Town failed: the application was denied because the log cabins and other historic structures were no longer in their original locations.<sup>36</sup>

### *A Uniquely Alaskan Landmark*

The main project during the 1980s and 1990s turned out to be the restoration of the sternwheeler *Nenana*. Since the Centennial Exhibition in 1967 the *Nenana*, moored in a man-made pond, had been the centerpiece of the park. To make the boat financially self-supporting, the Sandbar restaurant had been installed. To make room for this facility, the interior bulkheads and staterooms on the salon deck had been removed, the smoking room was turned into a kitchen, and the observation lounge had become the bar and dance floor.<sup>37</sup> The cargo deck was also used during the winter months for a Christmas market and craft displays. In 1972 the riverboat was listed on the National Register of Historic Places, which made it easier to apply for grants for restoration and preservation.

New insights in historic preservation, which were strongly supported by the Alaskaland Commission and the recommendations in Pentes' *Alaskaland Masterplan*, reversed years of neglect, resulting in a policy of "preserving the *Nenana* as a uniquely Alaskan landmark and link to our frontier river town history."<sup>38</sup> One of the first actions in this preservation process was the closing of the Sandbar Restaurant in 1982 after a survey by the Columbia-Sentinel Engineers revealed that the boat was in very bad shape, with its bow and superstructure rotting and close to collapsing.<sup>39</sup> The vessel was moved across 200 feet of land from its muddy pond to a new concrete foundation, and a large-scale program of stabilization and restoration was begun. In 1981 the costs of this restoration had been estimated at \$626,556.<sup>40</sup> The records of Alaskaland reveal this restoration process as plagued by bad luck, slow progress, and many demands for more money.

In 1987 the City of Fairbanks transferred the title of Alaskaland to the Fair-

36. "Minutes Alaskaland Commission meeting," typescript, Jan. 9 1980, Folder Meeting Jan. 9 1980, Box 3, Alaskaland Commission Papers (Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks). Interview with Renee Blahuta, member of the Alaskaland Commission, May 17, 2000.

37. Jesmain, "Heritage Interpretation," 54.

38. "Minutes Alaskaland Commission meeting," typescript, Nov. 12 1980, Folder Meeting Nov. 12 1980, Box 3, Alaskaland Commission Papers (Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks).

39. Jesmain, "Heritage Interpretation," 55.

40. "Proposal to City of Fairbanks for 1981," typescript, 1980, Folder Draft Capital Project Proposals 1981, Box 2, Alaskaland Commission Papers (Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks).



Front view of the S.S. *Nenana*, “the Queen of the Yukon,” Pioneer Park, Fairbanks, Alaska, Summer 2003. (Photograph by Henk Binnendijk)

banks North Star Borough, and the restoration of the S.S. *Nenana* was taken over by the Fairbanks Historic Preservation Foundation (FHPF), a private sector foundation which in 1992 finished the restoration of the inner and outer structure of the boat for \$1.7 million.<sup>41</sup> Two years later, in May 1989, the S.S. *Nenana* was upgraded from the National Register of Historic Places site to a

41. Jesmain, “Heritage Interpretation,” 58. Funding for the restoration came from private sources (40%), local government (15%), and the state (45%).

National Historic Landmark, a status which gave access to technical support and assistance in the preservation of the boat and which made it somewhat easier to acquire funding for preservation.<sup>42</sup>

Today, for a small fee, visitors can take a guided tour of the sternwheeler and admire the restored state rooms, the lounge, and the dining room; they can climb up to the wheel house and view the impressive construction of this ship. The FHPPF also created a new attraction on the vessel: an interpretive diorama, positioned in the cargo hold and reconstructing on HO scale ( $\frac{1}{8}$  inch equals 1 foot) the 22 villages along the banks of the Tanana River and the Yukon River which were once serviced by the S.S. *Nenana*. Although the diorama is very accurately done and gives a detailed impression of the former route of the *Nenana*, one might argue that the authenticity of the huge cargo hold was destroyed by turning it into an exhibition room for this attraction. However, since owners of National Historic Landmarks are free to make changes “with respect to the property” and since the Borough administration welcomed possible extra fees from Alaskaland attractions, no restrictions were placed on FHPPF which would have prevented them from installing this exhibit.

### *Telling “The Story of Fairbanks”*

In retrospect, the Alaskaland Commission’s *Development Plan* and Jack Pentec’s *Master Plan* have been crucial for the park’s survival, although their envisioned fundamental transformation of Alaskaland’s identity and attractions failed at the time. Their most important effect was that all parties involved were convinced of the need to improve the park’s condition. In 1981 their recommendations were supported by the publication of the Department of Transportation and Public Facilities of the State of Alaska’s *Inventory and Condition Survey of Public Facilities—Alaskaland Complex at Fairbanks, Alaska 1980–1981*, which served as the basis for the next years’ bringing up to code of all structures of Alaskaland. The survey more or less forced the responsible authorities to fund major utility improvements in the park, which was especially beneficial for the historic buildings and the sternwheeler *Nenana*.

However, even with the park’s improved condition, the identity of Alaskaland stayed dual or even ambivalent—in the 1980s and 1990s it was neither a full-fledged history park nor a real amusement park. Instead, it was a merging of the two types of parks, which created different reactions from visitors: “Some visitors find a theme park in Alaska a little corny, while others think it is an enjoyable step back into Alaska’s history.”<sup>43</sup>

42. See for information on the National Historic Landmarks program: <http://www.cr.nps.gov/nhl/>.

43. Jim DuFresne, *Alaska: A Travel Survival Kit* (Hawthorne, Australia: Lovely Planet Publications, 1994), 381.



Opinions on this dual identity of Alaskaland started to change toward the end of the century. From the middle of the 1980s, public interest in the history of Fairbanks had increased strongly, “as is evidenced in visitor tours, Golden Days activities, historic restaurant/lodge development, courses in the public schools, the publication of books on local history, and finally, in redevelopment of historic buildings for new uses,”<sup>44</sup> explained architect Janet Matheson. In September 1986, Matheson, by order of the city, published her report *Historic Districts in the City of Fairbanks*. One of her recommendations was to “develop a long-range preservation plan for historic properties at Alaskaland with the Alaskaland Commission.”<sup>45</sup> Although such an overall preservation plan was never developed, this advice, together with earlier reports and plans, indicates a growing awareness of the need to preserve the historic structures of the park. Driving forces in this Alaskaland preservation movement were the members of the Alaskaland Commission and the volunteers of the Fairbanks Historic Preservation Foundation and the Tanana-Yukon Historical Society.

In the late 1990s, the future of the park again became the focus of local debate. After repeated complaints about the condition of the park, the Borough installed the community-based Alaskaland Review Panel in 1997 in order to make recommendations for maintaining and developing Alaskaland for future generations. Partly affected by the booming national interest in historic heritage and preservation, the review panel developed a clear new perception of the purpose of the park.<sup>46</sup> In its report of March 1999, twenty years after the Pentes *Masterplan*, the review panel emphasized that historic and cultural preservation should be the park’s primary use. Alaskaland’s secondary use was to be a location for events and recreation, “if effectively integrated with the historic/cultural preservation use.” Finally, an explicit choice for the mission of Alaskaland was made: “The Park cannot and should not attempt to be all things to all people.”<sup>47</sup> The panel wanted the park to focus on residents of the Fairbanks North Star Borough as its primary user group, in order to give them “an opportunity to learn of and enjoy the history and culture heritage of Fairbanks and share it with visiting friends and relatives.”<sup>48</sup> With this recommendation, out-of-town tourists were no longer in focus as the main future user group, although they were still welcome because their “dollars spent directly at the Park, are an extremely important potential fund-

44. Janet Matheson, *Historic Districts in the City of Fairbanks. Identification of Potential Historic Districts Based on the Historic Building Inventory of 1985 & Recommendations for Preservation* (Fairbanks, September 1986), 61.

45. *Ibid.*

46. In *Keeping Time: The History and Theory of Preservation in America*, William J. Murtagh points to federal legislation (National Historic Preservation Act 1966 and Tax Reform Act 1976) as the source of this interest, together with increasing cooperation in preservation between the public and private sector (pp. 62–77).

47. Alaskaland Review Panel, *Final Recommendations*. Fairbanks North Star Borough, March 25, 1999, p. 8.

48. Review Panel, *Final*, p. 11.

ing source for the Park.”<sup>49</sup> In dismissing tourists as the main target group, a de facto situation of declining attractiveness for visitors, which had existed for many years, was acknowledged. Instead, tourists were considered as a possible source of extra funding for the park.

The choices in favor of heritage preservation and Fairbanks residents had implications on behalf of the operation of the future park, in particular its ownership. For years interest groups within the Fairbanks community had supported the selling of the park to the private sector. They had argued that Fairbanks’ taxpayers shouldn’t be funding the tourist industry (souvenir shops, food stands, rides, and shows) in Alaskaland by providing the infrastructure, maintenance, and overall coordination of the park. In no longer considering Alaskaland as a prime tourist destination and instead taking local residents as the primary user group, the review panel took away the arguments of those in favor of selling the park to the private sector. Pragmatically the panel argued:

Historic/cultural preservation is not a very lucrative business. The reality is that old things are much more expensive to maintain than new things. Historic/cultural preservation projects usually require substantial initial capital investment and significant ongoing maintenance costs. It is a rare private venture that can absorb the substantial costs associated with historic/cultural preservation and still realize a reasonable return on their investment.”<sup>50</sup>

Besides, although selling the park to a private developer would bring in millions of dollars at once and thousands of dollars in property tax each year, a commercially operated park would also mean a lesser quality of life for the Fairbanks residents who would lose (free) access to the park and its recreation and event opportunities.<sup>51</sup> In the future, the current management of the park as a partnership between the borough (which provided infrastructure and maintenance), private industry (for the operation of commercial activities), and nonprofit organizations (for the operation of historic/cultural exhibits) was to be maintained, since “each partner does what they do best.”<sup>52</sup>

The panel’s emphasis on Fairbanks’ heritage in the future park implied a new approach towards historic buildings. One of its recommendations was the need for repair and restoration of the existing structures according to written historical integrity guidelines. These guidelines were to reflect an appropriate balance between “rigid historic accuracy” and “practical economic reality,” in order to create an “authentically” historic Park atmosphere.<sup>53</sup> The park’s historic integrity efforts were to be supported by a half-time historic curator, to be funded by the Fairbanks North Star Borough.

In the future park, the parameters of the historic and cultural attractions

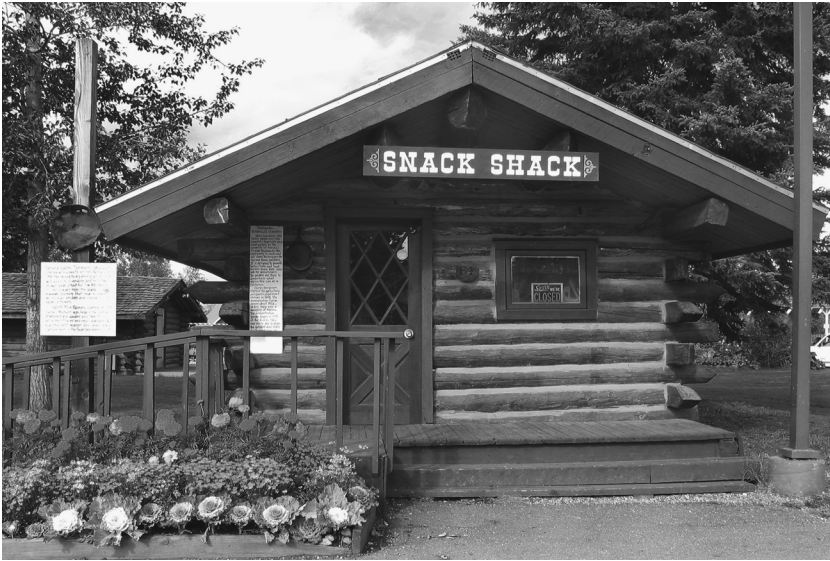
49. Review Panel, *Final*, p. 11.

50. Review Panel, *Final*, p. 12.

51. Review Panel, *Final*, p. 13.

52. Review Panel, *Final*, p. 12.

53. Review Panel, *Final*, p. 36.



Historic log cabin, in use as “snack shack,” Pioneer Park, Fairbanks, Alaska, Summer 2003. (Photograph by Henk Binnendijk)

should be set on Fairbanks and surrounding areas, and from pre–gold rush (1903) to present. Gold Rush Town, the S.S. *Nenana*, Mining Valley, the Gold Dome, the Native Village, and the Railroad Depot were designated as the main historic preservation use areas. They were to remain unchanged because of their “important and unique” contribution to “the story of Fairbanks” as it is told in the park. Expansion of these exhibits was not recommended (“focus on quality rather than quantity of presentations”), but new ones would be welcomed if they were to make “the story of Fairbanks” more complete.<sup>54</sup> The visitor’s experience should be enhanced by offering a video on the history of Fairbanks, and guided and self-guided walking tours. Commercial activities were not to be banned from the park, but restricted to certain locations (Gold Rush Town, Mining Valley, and the Miniature Golf area) and they should not disturb the historical/cultural ambiance of the park.

In the winter of 2000–2001 the Fairbanks North Star Borough Assembly endorsed the general direction of the review panel’s recommendations, together with the McDowell Business Development Plan for Alaskaland, and created a focus group which was to prepare the renaming of the park.<sup>55</sup> The new name was to reflect the new historic preservation identity of the park and should prevent any further association with commercial theme parks like Dis-

54. Review Panel, *Final*, p. 17.

55. “Resolution no. 2000–45: A Resolution on the Future of Alaskaland,” Fairbanks North Star Borough Assembly, October 26, 2000.



Main entrance of Pioneer Park, Fairbanks, Alaska, Summer 2003. (Photograph by Henk Binnendijk)

neyland. The panel had even proposed five potential new names (none of which was Pioneer Park), and a decisionmaking process. In its meeting of October 25, 2001, the Borough Assembly finally adopted a resolution for renaming Alaskaland into Pioneer Park. The new name was an acknowledgement and a sign of appreciation for the initiative and accomplishment of the Pioneers of Alaska, who in the late 1950s had originated the park. Not all citizens were happy with the new name: they objected to the use of the name of a private club for a public park, and proposed to add “Centennial” to the adopted name of Pioneer Park. The name issue caused some controversy, but the opposition was not powerful enough to force the Borough Assembly or the City of Fairbanks Council into taking action.<sup>56</sup> Pioneer Park stayed on as the new name—the local past seemed best represented by the white pioneers as the cultural equivalents of the founding fathers of Fairbanks, while the memory of Fairbanks as central city in the 1967 celebration of the Centennial took second place. In this renaming one can see a process similar to what Bodnar has argued for the 1920s Midwest: one group’s vernacular interests prevailed over nationalistic interests (here embodied by the Alaskan and

56. “Resolution no. 2001–78. A Resolution Rescinding Resolution No. 2001–71 Renaming Alaskaland to Pioneer Park and Asking the Mayor to Submit a New Name for Alaskaland from the List Provided by the Alaskaland Review Panel and McDowell Report,” Fairbanks North Star Borough Assembly, December 13, 2001, was defeated. <http://www.co.fairbanks.ak.us/Meetings/Assembly/2002meetings/072502/action.pdf> (accessed January 2, 2007). Also: “Regular Meeting Minutes,” Fairbanks City Council Regular Meeting, April 22, 2002. <http://www.ci.fairbanks.ak.us/departments/council/minutes.php> (accessed January 2, 2007).

American state) in public memory.<sup>57</sup> In the summer of 2002 the Borough decided to rename the Civic Center in the park as the Alaska Centennial Center for the Arts, in this way accommodating the critics

During the following years it became obvious that the recommendations of the 1999 review panel and consecutive plans would not result in a fundamentally different park. The borough, in cooperation with its partners in the park, made a serious and successful effort to improve and maintain the infrastructure of the park, resulting in better accessibility and an improved outlook. Regulations for commercial activities in the park became somewhat stricter, and the park's Web site was expanded with more historical information and photographs. Since the Fairbanks Historical Preservation Foundation was considered an organization "that cares deeply about the borough's historical assets,"<sup>58</sup> their lease for the operation, maintenance, and restoration of large historic attractions like the Riverboat *Nenana* and the Harding Railroad Car was renewed each time without an obligation to operate in compliance to formal preservation guidelines. Throughout the park, in particular in Mining Valley, more information plaques have been placed near historic structures and equipment, and an exhibition on historic gold mining was established in the Mining Tunnel. So far, the recommended hiring of a half-time historic curator hasn't taken place and historical integrity guidelines have not been written. Recommendations for the production of a video telling the story of Fairbanks and a self-guided walking tour also haven't yet been realized. The park's functions as playground, picnic location, and festival grounds for Fairbanks' residents didn't change. In short, the latest efforts to transform the park's image as an over-commercialized tourist trap into a park with historic and cultural preservation as its primary use has resulted in a historic facelift together with an overall improved presentation of the park's attractions and facilities. An explanation of these outcomes isn't hard to find: in its policy making the borough, being the public owner and operator of Pioneer Park, has to take into consideration all the involved local groups and organizations. This often comes down to a policy for which "benefiting the community as well as increasing the park's tourism potential" is an important rationale, preferably at a minimal cost.<sup>59</sup>

57. Bodnar, *Remaking America*, p. 249.

58. "Resolution no. 2003-56. A Resolution Authorizing the mayor to forgive \$12,218.00, Money Owed to the Fairbanks North Star Borough by the Fairbanks Historical Preservation Foundation, to Satisfy Partial Repayment of a Grant Distributed in 1998," Fairbanks North Star Borough Assembly, August 28, 2003. <http://www.co.fairbanks.ak.us/Meetings/resolutions/2003/2003-56.pdf> (accessed January 2, 2007).

59. For example: "Resolution no. 2002-49. A Resolution Authorizing the Mayor to Extend the Lease of the Riverboat *Nenana* and Harding Car to the Fairbanks Historic Preservation Foundation," Fairbanks North Star Borough Assembly, June 13, 2002. <http://www.co.fairbanks.ak.us/Meetings/resolutions/2002/2002-49.pdf> (accessed January 2, 2007).



### Conclusion

The story of Alaskaland/Pioneer Park is an intriguing one, and is probably not unique. Everywhere in the U.S. concerned citizens, united in nonprofit organizations, have initiated projects to save the local past from destruction by relocating historic buildings and artifacts in parks or historic districts. What makes the history of this park distinctive is the coincidence of the Pioneers' first development of the park's site and the state's choice of Fairbanks as central exhibition site for the 1967 Centennial Celebration. As a consequence, the Pioneers of Alaska lost their exclusive grip on most of the park's development and operation. Instead the park, though public, became an excellent example of partnership between public and private sectors: in its almost forty years of existence at least ten major forces determined the park's future. Involved were public institutions like the State of Alaska, the City of Fairbanks, and the Fairbanks North Star Borough, which installed civic commissions like the Alaska Purchase Centennial Commission, the Alaskaland Commission, and the Alaskaland Review Panel. City and borough successively owned the park and paid the salaries of its management and maintenance employees. A number of private nonprofit groups influenced the park's establishment and policy: Igloo 4 and Auxiliary 8 of the Pioneers of Alaska, the A67 organization, the Fairbanks Historical Preservation Foundation, and other historical volunteer groups within the Fairbanks community. The private profit sector was represented by local business people operating large or small enterprises (retail, food, amusement) in the park, and by professionals (consultants, architects, engineers) who were hired to give their expert advice on the park's future attractions and development, historic value, or building qualities.

Yet its public status mattered. Time and time again the residents of Fairbanks, with their complaints, criticism, and cheers, and often with the help of the local press, turned out to be indispensable to the continuation of the park. Alaskaland became a recurring controversy in the Fairbanks' community, initiating referenda, plans, and reports which most of the time agreed on one issue: most of Fairbanks' residents wanted Alaskaland to stay. Even though the park had not developed into a major tourist attraction benefiting the city's economy, the people of Fairbanks had grown to appreciate its presence, as consumers of its facilities and as participants in the operation of its attractions. The complicated origins and establishment of the park, its ongoing financial problems and its recurring low priority in the eyes of the city initially offered ample unrestricted possibilities to private (profit and nonprofit) involvement, resulting in a park where the struggle between history as heritage and history as commodity was won by the latter.<sup>60</sup> Over time, the residents came to take often ambivalent pride in this facility, because for them the park represents

60. Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 209.



more than a nice picnic location or a not-so-profitable tourist attraction. In spite of their increasingly different lifestyle from that of the early twentieth-century pioneers, many Alaskans like to consider themselves to be modern pioneers, living on the last frontier. Together with a strong belief in the creed of individualism and freedom, that image could ironically claim to harbour significant aversion to government and its regulations, the very entity that enabled them to recast the park in this preferred “pioneer” form. From the perspective of popular influence, the change in Alaskaland/Pioneer Park can be seen as a manifestation of Alaskan vernacular public memory coming to emphasize the continuity in Alaska’s identity in past and present.

In fact, the history of Alaskaland/Pioneer Park resembles Alaska’s history itself—both histories are a mixture of private and public initiatives and involvement, where most of the time motives of profit turned out to be the strongest.<sup>61</sup> In the late 1990s—partly compelled by necessity and partly inspired by nationwide trends—this boosterish mentality in the park’s operation was challenged by an approach prioritizing heritage and preservation. This time it seemed as if “history as commodity” was to be defeated by “history as heritage,” symbolized in the 2002 change of name from Alaskaland into Pioneer Park. However, up to now, this new priority did not create a fundamental transformation of the Park’s policies—as ever, in its historic exhibits Pioneer Park shows a popularization of Fairbanks’ early twentieth-century pioneer experience, while commercial activities generate financial resources for a large part of its operation.<sup>62</sup> Neither changing perceptions on the importance of heritage and historic preservation nor the park’s failure to become a major tourist attraction were able to replace a forty-year partnership of private and public sectors. Together with a boosterish tradition in Alaska’s history, the many interests involved in this public park made the current compromise possible. In the end, the broad involvement of Fairbanks’ community safeguarded the park’s survival.

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61. Peter A. Coates, *The Trans-Alaska Pipeline Controversy: Technology, Conservation, and the Frontier* (London and Toronto: Lehigh University Press, 1991) is a fascinating case study on this Alaska booster mentality. See also Tity deVries, “Frontier and Identity: the Case of Alaska,” in *Frontiers and Boundaries in U.S. History*, eds. Cornelis A. van Minnen and Sylvia L. Hilton (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2004), 229–45.

62. In fact, the current park fits into President Bush’s Preserve America initiative, which aims at communities that protect and celebrate their heritage and use their historic assets for economic development and community revitalization. See <http://www.preserveamerica.gov/overview.html> (accessed January 4, 2007).